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The Effect of Exposure to Bullying on Turnover Intentions: The Role of Perceived Psychological Contract Violation and Benevolent Behaviour

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The Effect of Exposure to Bullying on Turnover Intentions: The Role of Perceived Psychological Contract Violation and Benevolent Behaviour

Abstract

This study analyses the relationship between exposure to workplace bullying and turnover intentions. We hypothesized that this relationship is mediated by perceptions of psychological contract violation, and that employee benevolence acts as a moderator. A survey design was employed and data collected among business professionals (n=1,148). The analyses confirmed that perceived psychological contract violation partially explains the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions. The mediation process was stronger for those reporting more benevolent behaviour, suggesting the importance of perceived psychological contract violation is greater among those scoring high on benevolent behaviour. The results also show that highly benevolent employees are more affected by exposure to bullying behaviour, although the effects were equally detrimental, irrespective of benevolent behaviour, when employees were exposed to very high levels of bullying. The study advances understanding of the mechanisms that govern outcomes of exposure to bullying, highlighting in particular the role of perceived psychological contract violation, and examining differences concerning high or low benevolence employees.

Keywords: Bullying, employee mistreatment, harassment, psychological contract violation, turnover intentions

Introduction

Exposure to bullying behaviours, or negative acts, has negative consequences on target health, attitudes and work-related behaviours (e.g., Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Salin, 2013). For instance, such exposure has been associated with decreased commitment and higher intentions to leave an organization (McCormack, Casimir, Djurkovic, & Yang, 2009; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Poilpot-Rocaboy, Notelaers, & Hauge, 2009). Yet, we know little about the ‘why’ and ‘when’ of these relations. Our aim is to study in greater depth the relationship between exposure to bullying and employee turnover intentions. We argue that the relationship is mediated by perceptions of psychological contract violation, and employees’ tendency to engage in benevolent behaviour moderates this process.

There is much inconsistency in the literature on mistreatment as to what constitutes bullying. Some researchers have put forward specific criteria, for example the traditional Leymann criteria require at least one negative act at least weekly for at least six months (Leymann, 1996), whereas the more recent studies have sought to identify cut-off points for specific scales (Notelaers & Einarsen, 2013). However, Notelaers, Einarsen, deWitte, and Vermunt (2006) have shown that rather than being either actual victims of bullying or unaffected by such behaviours, most employees fall somewhere in between and report a degree of exposure to bullying behaviour (Notelaers et al., 2006). As in most bullying studies, this paper examines the effects of exposure to bullying behaviour (i.e. negative acts), irrespective of whether the intensity and frequency of such behaviours meet the criteria typically required formally to define the targeted person as an actual “bullying victim”. We use the term bullying to refer to a broad range of negative acts, which based on the previous research can be divided into three different types: work-related harassment, person-related harassment, and social exclusion (Notelaers, 2010; Notelaers et al., 2006). Work-related harassment includes, for instance, withholding information and persistent criticism, whereas person-

related harassment includes spreading rumours or making offensive or insulting remarks about the targeted person. Social exclusion refers to behaviour that isolates the targeted person.

The previous studies have shown that exposure to bullying has negative effects on employees and organizations. Bullying can lead to a vast range of negative effects on the psychological and physical health of those subjected to this systematic mistreatment. Typical symptoms are anxiety, disturbed sleep, and depression. Empirical studies have found that bullying is in fact a highly significant work-related predictor of a variety of health complaints (Hogh et al., 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Salin, 2013). Furthermore, exposure to bullying behaviour at work has detrimental effects on the targeted person's self-image and self-confidence (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006), and on their job satisfaction (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010). Given the nature of bullying, it is understandable that many of those exposed consider leaving their job, and studies have established a link between exposure to bullying and intention to leave (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hauge et al., 2010; McCormack et al., 2009).

Nielsen and Einarsen (2012) conducted a meta-analysis on outcomes of workplace bullying, based on the results from 66 independent samples (N=77,721). Their meta-analysis confirmed that exposure to bullying was associated with mental and physical health problems, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Eleven of the studies in the sample had included intent to leave as an outcome variable. The meta-analysis on turnover intentions, which comprised a total of 13,205 individuals, confirmed this relationship, finding a correlation coefficient of 0.28 between exposure to bullying behaviour and intention to leave.

Intention to leave is pertinent to organizations for several reasons. First, employee turnover intentions have been found to be a fairly good predictor of actual employee turnover (Kivimäki et al., 2007; Steel & Ovalle, 1984). However, a majority of those who express turnover intentions do not immediately leave. Recent meta-analyses have reported correlations of 0.35-0.38 (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012) between turnover intentions

and actual turnover. This discrepancy has given rise to different turnover models hypothesizing various processes to explain that many employees who would like to leave stay for different reasons of an exogenous or endogenous nature (Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Also, when intention to leave does not manifest itself in actual turnover, the behavioural intentions may result in other forms of deviant behaviours (e.g., Liu & Eberly, 2014). Employees who are reluctant to stay but feel they cannot leave, i.e. trapped stayers, have been reported to engage in withdrawal behaviours, such as absences and tardiness, and different forms of counterproductive work behaviours (Hom et al., 2012). As both actual turnover and withdrawal behaviours are associated with high costs for organizations, understanding the mechanisms that lead employees to exhibit behavioural intentions to leave is of great importance and organizational relevance.

As discussed above, studies have found a relationship between exposure to bullying and increased turnover intentions. Yet, we still know little about how exposure to negative behaviour from certain individuals translates into turnover intentions, and which factors may contribute to leaving the organization in response to this negative social behaviour. We argue that the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions is mediated by perceived psychological contract violation. In other words, if an employee is exposed to bullying, he or she is likely to feel betrayed by the organization and thus more likely to consider quitting. Furthermore, we argue that benevolent employees are likely to be more affected by the experience of bullying; perceived violations play a greater role in explaining their turnover intentions, and they feel a stronger relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions.

Exposure to Bullying from a Social Exchange Theory Perspective

Exposure to bullying is associated with increased turnover intentions, and in this section we introduce a social exchange theory perspective to present a way of understanding the mechanisms linking these two phenomena.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) argue that social exchange theory is one of the most influential paradigms for understanding workplace behaviour. In essence, social exchange is about a series of interactions that generate obligations (Emerson, 1976). One party needs to trust in the other that the benefits received will be reciprocated even when there is no formal contract. At the core of social exchange is the idea that the parties to the relationship develop trusting, loyal and mutual commitments over time, given that the parties abide by certain rules of exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The rule that researchers have typically focused on is reciprocity: one party's actions are contingent upon those of the other party. In a work setting, this means employees repay a favourable work environment and conditions, with positive work-related attitudes and behaviours. In contrast, unfavourable treatment is likely to result in downwards adjustments of those attitudes and behaviours (Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

The idea of a psychological contract builds on social exchange theory and became increasingly popular after the publication of Rousseau's 1989 article on the topic. In essence, psychological contracts are about the largely implicit beliefs about promises and reciprocal obligations in the exchange relationship (Rousseau 1989; 1995). What is important to note is that in contrast to legal commitments, psychological contracts are informal and often implicit and indirect, casting perceptions and interpretations of the other's attitudes and behaviour in a central role. According to Conway and Briner (2009), the psychological contract essentially helps us understand two things: how reciprocal promises oblige employees to perform tasks for the employer, and how employees react when they believe promises made have been broken. This article emphasises the latter.

Psychological contract breach refers to perceived failure to fulfil obligations. The previous research has shown that such failure negatively influences employee attitudes and behaviours. For instance, the studies have shown that breach results in reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, decreased loyalty and willingness to defend the organization, and increased intentions

to leave (Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood, & Bolino, 2002; Raja, Johns, & Ntalianis, 2004; Robinson 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1999; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007).

Originally, the terms breach and violation were used interchangeably. However, Morrison and Robinson (1997) separated the two, arguing that breach refers to the cognitive awareness of a promise unfulfilled, whereas violation refers to the emotional experience – typically feelings of anger and betrayal – that may follow such an insight. Breaches are likely to result in feelings of betrayal, and studies have demonstrated that the feeling of violation is an important mediator between contract breach and negative outcomes (e.g., Suazo, 2009; Zhao et al., 2007). We therefore focus on psychological contract violation, i.e. instances where employees feel betrayed because they feel that a promise has been broken.

As discussed earlier, the psychological contract captures a highly subjective interpretation of the employment relationship (e.g., Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau 1995; 2001). Therefore, the precise contents of such contracts are very hard to define and establish. Rousseau (2001) discusses how pre-employment schemas, the recruitment process, and post-hire socialization all contribute to the formation of the psychological contract. So, in addition to explicit and implicit promises made by the employer, also societal and professional pre-hire socialization shapes the employee's expectations, and provides a lens through which later experiences and promises are interpreted. We argue that even prior to employment, employees have certain schemas related to “acceptable” workplace behaviour, which are further refined through actual employment experiences and implicit and explicit promises made. Legislation, media attention, and societal awareness of certain risk factors may all shape such pre-employment schemas. While Parzefall and Salin (2010) argue that employees are likely to have expectations of organizational intervention whether or not specific anti-bullying legislation is in place, the existence of such legislation and the high social awareness attached to bullying may make employees more likely to have incorporated

such expectations into their pre-employment schemas as part of the employer's obligations. For example, Hoel and Einarsen (2010), who studied the effects of anti-bullying legislation in Sweden, found that although the legislation was not necessarily successful in preventing and ending bullying, it clearly raised employees' expectations of swift and effective intervention.

When an employee is subject to bullying in the workplace, he or she is likely to perceive a failing on the part of the employer to fulfil its obligations – although perceived obligations may differ based on pre-hire societal and professional socialization, and early employment experiences. We argue that such perceptions of psychological contract violation are an important dimension of the bullying experience, and may help us understand why exposure to bullying results in negative attitudes towards the organization, and increased turnover intentions.

Employees are likely to expect the employer to provide a safe work environment, and to be treated with respect and dignity. The employee's expectations of respectful treatment would certainly be violated by being subject to bullying. Parzefall and Salin (2010) argue that if employees are exposed to bullying – whether from managers or peers – they are likely to expect organizational measures to be taken to end the behaviour, and that intervention, grievance, and investigation processes will be fair and efficient. If bullying nevertheless occurs, and the organization fails to put an end to it successfully, the employee is likely to conclude that the organization has not acted on its responsibility to protect them from harm and thereby failed to adhere to its obligations. As such, exposure to bullying may result in the employee feeling that the psychological contract has been violated, and may translate into negative attitudes towards the organization as a whole rather than only towards the perpetrator(s).

In line with the above, we hypothesize that perceived contract violation is a mechanism through which bullying translates into a negative evaluation of the employment relationship which in turn explains the increased turnover intentions reported in the bullying research.

H1: The positive relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions is mediated by psychological contract violation.

From an equity theory perspective (Adams, 1965), individuals typically seek an equitable balance between their own contributions and what they receive from the organization. In other words, due to expectations of reciprocity in social relationships, parties are likely to expect contributions to be repaid in kind (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Employees who themselves invest significantly in a relationship, may also be expecting more in return, and therefore be more sensitive to bad treatment or neglect on the part of the employer.

The research on psychological contract breach and violation reveals there are individual differences in how employees react to breach and violation, and personal disposition may thus be of importance (Raja et al., 2004). Miles, Hatfield and Huseman (1994) showed that employees differ on how sensitive they are to equity concerns, and also to what kind of outcomes they pay most attention. *Entitleds* prefer output/input ratios that exceed those by comparison with others, they focus on “getting” more than “giving”, and pay special attention to tangible extrinsic outcomes, such as pay and benefits. In contrast, *benevolents* focus more on “giving” and on intrinsic outcomes, such as sense of accomplishment and feelings of personal worth. They place greater emphasis on the relationship with their employer and find satisfaction when they can contribute their talents and expertise to the organization. Kickul and Lester (2001) showed that benevolents also reacted differently to perceived violations. They responded with greater decreases in job satisfaction and more negative effects than other employees to some breaches relating to intrinsic outcomes, such as autonomy and control, while reacting less strongly to breaches involving extrinsic outcomes, such as benefits and rewards. Workplace bullying may involve withdrawing valued tasks, engaging in excessive monitoring, and humiliating, ridiculing or insulting the employee. Exposure to bullying may, thus, in several ways change the meaningfulness of work itself, and reduce the sense of

accomplishment, autonomy and personal worth (MacIntosh, Wuest, Gray & Cronkhite, 2010). The previous research reported that employees' basic needs are thwarted when reporting exposure to bullying (Trépanier, Fernet, & Austin, 2013). Hence, bullying will very likely affect intrinsic outcomes, something to which benevolent employees are likely to be more sensitive (Kickul & Lester, 2001).

Given the norms of reciprocity (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and the particular focus on intrinsic outcomes among benevolent employees (e.g., Kickul & Lester, 2001), we argue that employees with a strong tendency to engage in benevolent behaviours are more affected by exposure to bullying. Due to norms of reciprocity, those who help others can reasonably expect more in return from the organization. However, those who act benevolently typically find satisfaction when they can give their talents and expertise to the organization, and may therefore be focusing more on relationship quality and intrinsic outcomes than expecting higher pay and benefits. As such, being subject to bullying in return for their input may be a particular blow to their worldview, and associate with perceptions of violation and the resulting compromised attitudes and willingness to continue working for the organization in question.

H2a: Benevolence will moderate the relationship between exposure to bullying and the degree of violation of the psychological contract.

H2b: Benevolence will moderate the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions.

As a consequence we also explicitly formulate:

H3: The mediating effect of psychological contract violation is stronger for employees who engage in high levels of benevolent behaviour.

Our hypotheses are presented in Figure 1 as a conceptual model.

(Figure 1. Conceptual model [approximately here])

Method

Sample

The sample comprised business professionals in Finland, recruited through the country's two largest professional organizations for business school graduates. They were employed in a diverse set of organizations, mostly within the private sector. The study was conducted as a web-based survey, and a covering letter and a link to the questionnaire were sent to 4,382 members from these two organizations. A random sample was selected after persons not currently working had been screened out. One reminder was sent out. This resulted in a total of 1,148 replies at a response rate of 26.2%. Survey fatigue among the respondents, who had received several other questionnaires that same year, may have negatively impacted willingness to respond.

Of those responding to the questionnaire, 62% were women and 38% men. As both organizations are fairly gender balanced, this indicated a somewhat higher tendency to respond among the women. The mean age was 44.0 years, with 7.3% below 30 years, 63.7% between 30 and 50, and 28.6% older than 50. With regard to formal organizational position, 17% classified themselves as representing management or top management, 23% as middle management, 50% as professionals working in expert positions, and 10% as regular employees/officials. In terms of tenure, 9% had worked less than a year for the current organization, 17% for 1–2 years, 24% for 3–5 years, 17% for 6–9 years, and 33% for 10 years or more.

National anti-bullying legislation was introduced in Finland in 2003. The Occupational Health and Safety Act requires employers to take measures on being informed of “harassment or inappropriate treatment” in the workplace. Some high publicity cases in the media on bullying have led to relatively high social awareness of the phenomenon among the general population.

Measures

Turnover intentions were measured with two items (Boroff & Lewin, 1997) that respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale. The items were “During the next year, I will probably

look for a new job outside this organization” and “I am seriously considering quitting this organization for an alternative employer”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.890.

Exposure to bullying was measured with the short version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Notelaers & Einarsen, 2008). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how often they had been subject to any of nine different negative acts during the past six months. Options ranged from never to daily. The mean score thus reflected both the number of bullying behaviours experienced and the frequency of the acts. The instrument measures a broad set of different behaviours, including work-related harassment, personal harassment, and social exclusion. However, the previous studies show that a one-factor structure is still the best fit (Notelaers & Einarsen, 2008). Sample items include “Someone withholding information which affects your performance”, “Spreading of rumours or gossip about you”, and “Being ignored or excluded”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.847.

Psychological contract violation was measured with four items (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Sample items included “I feel betrayed by this organization” and “I feel that this organization has violated the contract between us”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.896.

Benevolent behaviour was measured with Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, and Oosterhof’s (2003) helping scale, which comprises four items measuring the respondent’s willingness to help out and give their time across a diverse set of situations. Thus, the measure focuses on the input side rather than preferred outputs. Sample items included “I’m always ready to help or to lend a helping hand to those around me” and “I am willing to give of my time to help others who have work-related problems”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.846.

Procedures

Before testing the different hypotheses, we conducted a factor analysis in SPSS 22 using a maximum likelihood estimator, clearly showing the emergence of four separate factors. In line with our expectations, the items loaded on the factors they were supposed to measure. The rotated factor

matrix showed there was no cross-loading above 0.30 and the factors explained 55% of the variance. The factor scores were registered using the regression method, and further employed to test our mediation and moderation hypotheses.

Although the SPSS factor analysis revealed a satisfactory four factor solution, we also tested the extent to which the measurement model fit the data before proceeding with the analysis. In addition, we checked for common method variance by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis in MPLUS 6 using a WLS estimator to accommodate the ordinal response scales that were used. Table 1 shows that a four factor solution fits the data well ($CFI > .95$ and $TLI > .95$), and clearly better than a three or one factor solution. Finally, we also found that common method variance was not a threat to this study. The common method variance model, with a method factor where items loaded equally strongly on the method factor, was not associated with an improvement of fit. On the contrary, with 2 degrees of freedom less, the χ^2 increased by approximately 40.

In line with current views on mediation and moderation (MacKinnon, 2008; Preacher & Hayes, 2004), we conducted a moderated mediation analysis, also known as conditional indirect process modelling, using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013) for SPSS. One model was constructed to examine whether (1) benevolent behaviours moderated the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention, (2) benevolent behaviours moderated the relationship between workplace bullying and psychological contract violation, and (3) benevolent behaviours moderated the mediating effect of psychological contract violation in the relation between workplace bullying and turnover intentions. An approach of this nature examines the direct and indirect effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable via a mediator, as well as conditional effects moderating these relationships (Desrosiers, Vine, Curtiss, & Klemanski, 2014). Hence, all hypotheses were tested simultaneously with Model 8. Bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were generated for conditional indirect effects at the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles of non-reactivity based on 5000 bootstrap samples, as this approach has been

recommended for the examination of moderated mediation models (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Significant conditional direct effects of exposure to bullying were then estimated at each percentile level of benevolent behaviours, and according to the guidelines outlined by Hayes (2013). Point estimates were considered significant if the 95% confidence interval did not contain zero. To portray possible moderation results, we followed Hayes' recommendation and ran Model 1 of PROCESS to obtain a plot of the specific moderation. As turnover and turnover intentions may be affected by certain background factors, such as occupational position, gender and tenure (cf. Cotton & Tuttle, 1986), we decided to test if we had to control for them.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 2. Holding a top management position (pos1), working as an expert (pos3), and being tenured were significantly related to turnover intentions but not to psychological contract violation. Therefore, we controlled only for position and tenure with respect to the dependent variable, i.e. turnover intentions.

(Table 2 approximately here)

Table 3 portrays the unstandardized regression estimates from the PROCESS macro that we used to test our research hypotheses. The regression estimates showed that position in the organization was not significantly related to turnover intentions. However, tenure was significantly related to turnover intentions: with an increase in tenure, turnover intention decreased. Furthermore, we found that benevolent behaviour acted as a moderator on the relationship between exposure to bullying and psychological contract violation, and on the direct relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions. Hence, our findings support hypotheses 2a and 2b. Furthermore, benevolent behaviour did not moderate the relationship between psychological contract violation and turnover intentions. Following the recommendation of Hayes to use Model 1 to obtain a

graphical presentation of the interaction term, we estimated both interactions in SPSS and used the plot syntax and coordinates of the interaction produced by the PROCESS macro.

(Table 3 approximately here; Figure 2 approximately here)

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between exposure to bullying and benevolent behaviours, to the degree that the psychological contract was violated. The lines do not diverge to a large extent; the moderation is indeed modest. The significant interaction ($p = .004$) term added only 0.5% of explained variances according to the output of Model 1 of the PROCESS Macro. Yet, the figure shows that the relationship between exposure to bullying and psychological contract breach is stronger at higher levels of benevolent behaviours. Post hoc exploration of the interaction between exposure to bullying and benevolent behaviours, using the Johnson–Neyman technique, which provides an estimate of the values of the moderator at which the conditional effect becomes significant, indicated that exposure to bullying was significantly positively related to turnover intentions from the 2nd decetile of benevolent behaviours. Hence, when someone portrays no benevolent behaviours, exposure to bullying is not related to violation of the psychological contract. In addition, the figure clearly shows that at very high levels of exposure to workplace bullying, i.e. the 90th percentile, where the typically severe targets of bullying lie in the distribution, the level of benevolent behaviour is not particularly relevant as violation of the psychological contract nevertheless reached its highest level. This means that for employees who are inclined to exhibit high levels of benevolent behaviours, bullying is more dramatic because its relationship with the violation of the psychological contract is at its strongest. They had the lowest level of violation of the psychological contract from the outset.

Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between exposure to bullying and benevolent behaviour on turnover intentions. The lines do not diverge any further than in the previous interaction and the moderation ($p = .003$) is also modest, adding only 0.7% explained variance according to the output

of Model 1 of the PROCESS Macro. The figure shows that the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions was stronger at higher levels of benevolent behaviours than at lower levels. Post hoc exploration of interaction demonstrated that exposure to bullying was significantly positively related to turnover intentions from the 5th decile, meaning that only for moderate to high levels of benevolent behaviours was exposure to bullying significantly related to turnover intentions. The figure also clearly demonstrates that at very high levels of exposure to workplace bullying, i.e. the 90th percentile, where we typically expect to find severe targets of bullying, the level of benevolent behaviour is not particularly relevant because, irrespectively, turnover intentions are at their highest. Hence, for employees who are inclined to exhibit high levels of benevolent behaviours, the relationship between bullying and turnover intentions is at its strongest. These employees had the lowest level of turnover intentions from the outset.

After reporting both conditional direct effects, we turn to hypotheses one and three concerning the conditional process or indirect effect. Inspecting the bootstrapped confidence interval for the conditional indirect effect of exposure to bullying and turnover intentions allows us to test H1, stating that psychological contract violation mediates the relationship between bullying and turnover intentions. At the 10th percentile (-1.14), the indirect effect was 0.181 (BootLLCI=0.146; BootULCI=0.233), at the 25th percentile (-0.46) it was 0.200 (BootLLCI=0.166; BootULCI=0.245), at the 50th percentile (0.10) 0.217 (BootLLCI=0.180; BootULCI=0.263), at the 75th percentile (0.62) 0.233 (BootLLCI=0.189; BootULCI=0.287), and at the 90th percentile (1.18) of benevolent behaviours the indirect effect was 0.249 (BootLLCI=0.194; BootULCI=0.310). The results show that the indirect effect was significant. The relationship between bullying and turnover intentions is partially due to violation of the psychological contract. Hence, this supports our first hypothesis. In addition, the effects increased, the more benevolent behaviours were reported. This shows that at the higher levels of benevolence employees reported, the role of psychological

contract violation in explaining the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intentions increased. Hence, this lends support to hypothesis 3, too.

(Figure 3 approximately around here)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions. Adopting social exchange theory, we theorized that the relationship is mediated by psychological contract, and conducted an empirical study which proved to lend support to our hypotheses. Further, the results revealed that the mediation process was stronger for those reporting high levels of benevolent behaviour. Hence, the mediation was moderated. Finally, the direct relationship between exposure to workplace bullying and turnover intentions was stronger the more benevolently an employee behaved. However, at the highest levels of exposure to bullying behaviour, exposure was equally detrimental to all, irrespective of the level of benevolence.

In line with the previous research, this article clearly demonstrates that bullying is associated with higher turnover intentions (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hauge et al., 2010; Notelaers et al., 2006). The present study takes a step beyond establishing this link to analyse the mechanisms explaining the relationship. We show that perceptions of psychological contract violation partially mediate the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions. The previous research has shown that the psychological contract – that is, the highly subjective interpretation of the obligations in the employment relationships – and perceived violations of that contract have a strong impact on employee attitudes and behaviours (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1999; Zhao et al., 2007). Also, perceived violation seems to partly explain some of the negative effects of bullying.

Our study shows that psychological contract violation acts as a partial rather than full mediator, which indicates that also other processes may explain the relationship between exposure

to bullying and turnover intentions. While the study does not provide information on other mediators, there is perhaps room for some speculation based on the previous research. Trepanier et al. (2013) showed that bullying thwarted employees' need for growth, autonomy, and relatedness, and that was one of the reasons why bullying undermined psychological health at work. This lack of need satisfaction does not have to be related to the psychological contract and may therefore act as a parallel mediator, that is, also explain why bullying results in higher turnover intentions. This would be in line with the earlier research on the need for belongingness and effects of social ostracism (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007).

Additionally, the findings of this study highlight individual differences in responses to workplace bullying. Among employees who report high levels of benevolence, the relationship between intentions to leave and exposure to bullying is stronger. Also, the mediating effect of psychological contract violation is stronger for those who report higher levels of benevolence. This provides us with a more nuanced picture of responses to workplace bullying. Social relationships typically involve expectations of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). That is further consistent with an equity theory perspective (Adams, 1965), i.e. the idea that individuals seek an equitable balance between their own contributions and what they receive from the organization. This in turn is consistent with findings showing that highly committed employees are the ones who are most sensitive to unfairness in layoff processes (Brockner, Tyler, & Cooper-Schneider, 1992). Employees who invest more of themselves – in terms of commitment or prosocial behaviour – also seem to have higher expectations of fair and respectful treatment in return, and react more negatively when this is not the case. Benevolent individuals have been shown to care less about external outcomes, such as pay and benefits (Kickul and Lester, 2001). Instead, it has been noted that they react particularly strongly to breaches involving, for instance, autonomy and control. This is supported by our finding that for these employees, exposure to bullying behaviour affects perceptions of psychological violation more strongly.

Although benevolent behaviour moderated the relationship, the moderation effect was small. Also, among employees experiencing the highest levels of exposure to bullying behaviours, i.e. those typically regarded as actual bullying victims, levels of benevolence appear to have little impact. When exposure to bullying behaviours reaches a certain threshold, turnover intentions are equally high, irrespective of whether or not the employee reports high levels of benevolence. This finding is in line with other research that investigated whether the relationship between workplace bullying and outcome variables is moderated (e.g., Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008).

Other possible explanations for our findings must be acknowledged. Benevolent behaviour, which is typically positively endorsed both formally as well as informally by managers, may not only reflect a certain personal disposition but also be a form of response, that is, a way of trying to cope with or offset bullying. Although exposure to bullying is generally associated with decreased levels of helping behaviour, some employees may try to prove their worth – and thereby hope to end the negative behaviour they are exposed to – by being especially friendly and helpful (Niedl, 1995). This is in line with experimental studies which have demonstrated that individuals who have been ostracized perform better in cognitive ability tasks, as they attempt to demonstrate their worth (Jamieson, Harkins, & Williams, 2010). Similarly, research has shown that targets of workplace bullying may turn up for work even when sick, in order to demonstrate commitment and loyalty and avoid being characterized as a malingerer (e.g., Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011). However, when efforts to offset bullying by being helpful are unsuccessful, it may be that employees having tried this route become especially cynical, resulting in stronger perceptions of violation of the psychological contract and stronger intentions to quit.

Limitations

Although it might be argued that a prior causal order was inferred by asking respondents to indicate to what extent they were subjected to negative acts during the last six months, the data are cross-sectional. This means we cannot imply causality. For instance, it is possible that respondents

who have turnover intentions withdraw from helping others and feel negative towards the organization, with the result that they are being exposed to negative behaviour from others. Future research might try to separate the measurement of the concepts in this study over time, or produce a full three-wave cross-lagged panel design that could identify a causal order among the study variables *a posteriori*.

The next limitation to note is clearly mono-method bias, since we employed only self-reported measures. Yet, given that being bullied, the experience of a violation of the psychological contract, and turnover intentions typically lie in the eye of the beholder, it will be challenging for future research to overcome this. The assessment of benevolent behaviours evaluated by peers and the supervisor will, however be less problematic. Irrespective of the difficulty in overcoming the issue of same source bias, it may be responsible for overrating the effects reported in this study.

Another limitation of this study is the use of OLS estimates where the data distribution was skewed. Although such distributions are typical for bullying, psychological contract violation and turnover intentions, the typical remedies i.e. using a robust ML or a WLSMV type estimator in an SEM framework, are not helpful because they can only deal with a limited level of skewedness and kurtosis. As a result, the standard error may not be trustworthy (Vermunt & Magidson, 2005). To check whether our findings were robust, we ran a piecemeal approach to moderated mediation in Latent Gold 5 (Vermunt & Magidson, 2013). This program offers a non-parametric statistical alternative to test the hypotheses. Hence, it can deal with any type of violation of distribution. The results showed there was a significant mediation and that it was moderated. All effects had the same direction and were alike. Since this type of analysis may not be known to a wider audience, we choose to stay with the traditional OLS results.

Practical Implications

The results of this study have several important implications. First, it showed that being exposed to workplace bullying is associated with perceptions of psychological contract violation.

This seems to suggest that targets of bullying feel betrayed by, and come to hold negative attitudes towards, not only the actual perpetrator, but also the organization in general. If so, it seems to suggest that targets hold the organization in general rather than only the individual perpetrator(s) responsible. This provides stronger arguments for the importance of organizational action against bullying, to avoid such negative attitudes towards the organization as a whole.

Further, the results show the effect of exposure to bullying behaviour on turnover intentions is somewhat stronger for those who exhibit benevolent behaviour, and that psychological contract violation is a stronger mediator for those who score high on benevolent behaviour. This, too, may have some implications. From the organizational perspective, it is highly desirable that employees engage in giving behaviours, and those who willingly contribute their time and talent to the organization are therefore particularly valuable to it (cf. Miles, Hatfield, & Huseman, 1989, on benevolence and worker performance). However, our findings show that they are also somewhat more affected by exposure to bullying and perceived psychological contract violation. Failure to intervene in bullying thus risks particularly valuable employees choosing to exit the organization or withdrawing effort, further highlighting the need to address such negative social behaviour proactively.

More generally, the results support the previous findings that exposure to bullying is associated with higher turnover intentions. This suggests that exposure to negative acts is likely to lead to higher actual turnover risk, as turnover intentions have been found to be a predictor of actual turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Jiang et al., 2012; Kivimäki et al., 2007). However, as discussed earlier, even when increased intention to leave does not manifest itself in actual turnover, such intentions may result in other forms of deviant behaviours, such as withdrawal behaviours and counterproductive work behaviour. Employees wanting to leave, but feeling trapped to stay, may thus exhibit lower productivity (Hom et al., 2012). Feeling trapped may be of particular relevance in cases of exposure to bullying. Research has shown that bullying itself is typically a highly stressful

and draining experience (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Hauge et al., 2010; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), and that it can have severe negative impacts on self-confidence (e.g., Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006). Taking the initiative required to actually change jobs may become more and more difficult as coping resources are depleted, and the reputation of the target may have been attacked (Salin, 2013). Bullying may, thus, result in decreased employability, making the exposed employee feel even more trapped. As such, even when turnover intentions do not manifest themselves in actual turnover, the costs to the organization may be significant.

Suggestions for Further Research

In this study, we have focused on how employees' own exposure to negative behaviours may be seen as a violation of the psychological contract and result in increased turnover intentions. An important avenue for further research is to analyse to what extent witnessing others being subjected to bullying is associated with a sense of violation of the psychological contract. Research has shown that witnessing bullying is associated with many negative consequences, such as higher stress levels and poorer health (see Hogh et al., 2011 and Salin, 2013, for summaries). Salin (2013) speculated that this may partly be because witnessing bullying shatters the observer's worldview or beliefs in a just world. For example, research on layoffs has demonstrated that they have negative effects not only on those directly affected but also on employees who remain (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997). Several researchers argue that layoff notices to colleagues may be perceived by employees who keep their jobs as a contract breach, and the feelings of betrayal may then lead to downward adjustments in the employees' attitudes and behaviours (Edwards, Rust, McKinley, & Moon, 2003; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997). In line with this, Parzefall and Salin (2010) hypothesized that bullying and a lack of organizational actions to stop it may be perceived as a psychological contract violation also from the bystanders' perspective. This remains to be empirically tested.

This study was conducted in Finland, a country with explicit anti-bullying legislation, a long tradition of research on bullying, and societal awareness of both school and workplace bullying.

This may have shaped the respondents' views on bullying behaviour and acted as a lens through which the employee interpreted the organization's perceived obligations. Hoel and Einarsen (2010), who studied the effects of anti-bullying legislation in Sweden, found that although such legislation was not necessarily successful in preventing and ending bullying, it clearly raised employees' expectations of swift and effective intervention. As argued by Rousseau (2001), although psychological contracts are primarily shaped by explicit and implicit promises made by the employing organization, more general cultural norms and schemas may also affect interpretation of perceived obligations. It would be interesting to repeat this study in a context where no such legislation exists to see if employees are equally likely to feel betrayed on exposure to bullying.

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Table 1. Fit statistics for different measurement models.

	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Single factor	9054.22	152	.230	.688	.649
Two factor solutions
Three factors: (Benevolent B.) (Turnover I.) (Psych. contract)	4548.81	149	.163	.846	.823
Three factors: (Benevolent B. + Bullying) (Turnover I.) (Psych. contract)	2818.02	149	.127	.906	.893
Four factors	1162.83	146	.079	.964	.958
Four factors + CMV equal loadings	1203.49	144	.081	.963	.956

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender (female)	62%	1							
2. Tenure (years)	-	-.007	1						
3. Top management/ other (pos1)	16.40%	-.153**	.044	1					
4. Middle manager/ other (pos2)	23.20%	-.025	.111**	-.242**	1				
5. Expert/other (pos3)	50.20%	.068*	-.099**	-.440**	-.547**	1			
6. Bullying	1.427 (0.43)	.007	.061*	.007	.106**	-.051	1		
7. Violation of psych. contract	2.346 (1.41)	.026	.018	-.142**	-.011	.105**	.431**	1	
8. Benevolent behaviour	5.618 (0.88)	.004	-.016	.025	.001	-.062*	-.176**	-.210**	1
9. Turnover intentions	3.191 (1.94)	.003	-.164**	-.140**	-.005	.109**	.265**	.519**	-.147**

*ns: p > .05, * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*

Table 2. Explaining turnover intentions: Unstandardized regression coefficients

	Violation of Psychological Contract	Turnover Intention
Intercept	.129 ns	.535***
Top management/other (pos1)	-.457***	-.108 ns
Middle manager/other (pos2)	-.254*	-.042 ns
Expert/other (pos3)	-.034	.067 ns
Tenure	-.007	-.124***
Bullying (B)	.452**	.083**
Benevolent Behaviour (BB)	-.140***	-.039 ns
B*BB	.058*	.053*
Violation Psychological Contract (VPC)	-	.473***
R ²	23.63%	31.11 %

ns: $p > .05$, * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Figure 1. Conceptual model

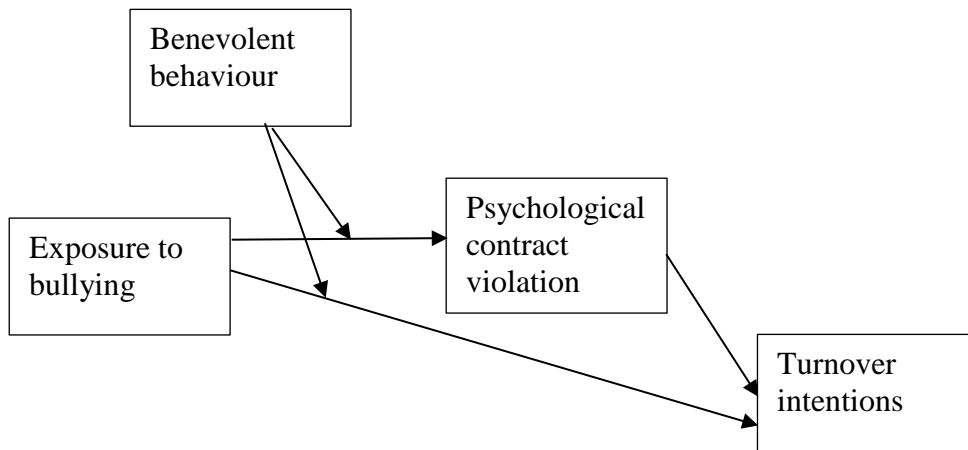


Figure 2. Moderation of benevolent behaviours on the relationship between exposure to bullying and violation of the psychological contract

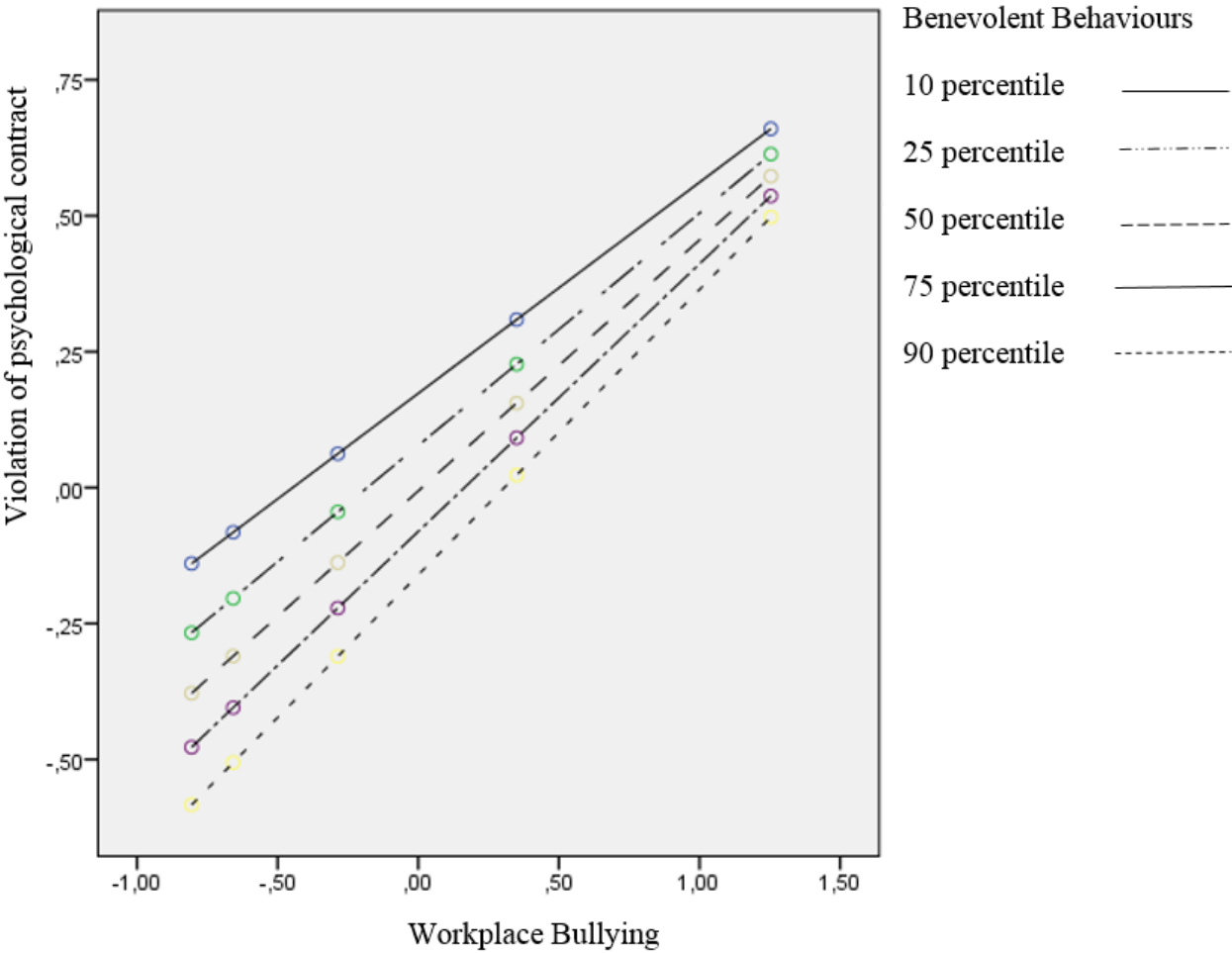


Figure 3. Moderation of benevolent behaviours on the relationship between exposure to bullying and turnover intentions

